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ABSTRACT

This booklet is designed for anyone who is interested in bringing state policymakers and their constituents together to dialogue and deliberate about public education. It contains information about what community dialogue is, why state policymakers should be included in dialogue with members of the communities they represent, and how to successfully invite and encourage state policymakers to participate in a community dialogue on education. The booklet is useful if you are looking for a way to help people connect with their policymakers on an important education issue in their community, if you are organizing a community dialogue on education and you want to know how to successfully include state policymakers, and if you are considering how to make your next dialogue program even more satisfying. While this booklet does not contain specific information about how to organize or facilitate community dialogue programs, it does provide details about where to find these resources. (DFR)

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A Guide to Involving Policymakers in a Community Dialogue on Education

Making the Connection

ED 446 363

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A Guide to Involving Policymakers in a Community Dialogue on Education

Making the **Connection**

Welcome!

This booklet will be helpful to you if you are

- Looking for a way to help people connect with their policymakers on an important education issue in their community.
- Organizing a community dialogue on education, and you want to know how to successfully include state policymakers.
- Considering how to make your next dialogue program even more satisfying.

What's in this Guide?

This booklet is designed for anyone who is interested in bringing state policymakers and their constituents together to dialogue and deliberate about public education. It contains information about

- What community dialogue is,
- Why state policymakers should be included in dialogue with members of the communities they represent, and
- How to successfully invite and encourage state policymakers to participate in a community dialogue on education.

What's Not in this Guide?

This booklet does not contain specific information about how to organize or facilitate community dialogue programs. Please see page 16 of this guide for details about where to find these resources.

Throughout this booklet, we provide quotes from students, parents, educators and policymakers about their personal experiences participating in community dialogue programs on education.

Where to Find It

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Who We Are

This booklet was prepared by the Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL). The information and guidance it contains are based on SEDL's experience as an organizational partner in implementing the program, *Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools*, and on the findings of SEDL's research on state policymaker participation in the program. *Calling the Roll* was implemented in 15 Arkansas and Oklahoma communities in Fall 1998. It was designed to create an open, non-partisan opportunity for ordinary citizens and their state legislators to communicate. SEDL's goal in studying the *Calling the Roll* program was to learn whether community dialogue offers a feasible way for state policymakers to interact with constituents about education policy-relevant issues.

In addition to students, parents, community members, and educators, twenty state legislators participated in the *Calling the Roll* program. Through interviews and surveys, SEDL gathered information about these legislators' experiences. From these data, we have learned that community dialogue affects policymakers in the following areas:

- Access to information about the public's values and perspectives on education,
- Relationships with constituents, and
- Awareness of the potential for community action towards improving education.

SEDL recognizes and thanks the following key partner organizations for their efforts in coordinating and studying the *Calling the Roll* program: the Study Circles Resource Center in Pomfret, Connecticut; Arkansas Friends for Better Schools (contact the Arkansas School Boards Association); the League of Women Voters of Oklahoma; and the Center for Research on Teaching and Learning (now the Center for Applied Studies in Education) at the University of Arkansas, Little Rock.

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Connecting with the Process of Community Dialogue

What Is a Community Dialogue on Education?

Community dialogue is a process that allows large numbers of citizens to examine public issues and develop strategies for change. In a community dialogue program, people meet in small groups to dialogue about complex problems in a personal, civil, and collaborative way. Face-to-face discussion and deliberation has a long history in the U.S., reaching as far back as Native American councils and, in the early 1600s, colonial town meetings. Today, civic and nonprofit organizations, interfaith groups, and public agencies across the nation are using community dialogue to

- Define and discuss persistent social and political problems.
- Determine what matters most to a specific community.
- Explore potential solutions and their consequences.
- Take action by implementing selected solutions.

Community dialogues on education create an opportunity for people who care about schools to actively participate in education change by sharing their experiences, concerns, and ideas. Potentially, there are as many different configurations and topics for community dialogues on education as there are communities. The impact of each program also is unique; benefits can range from a greater commitment to public education on the part of community members to actual school- and community-wide problem solving and action. Regardless of their specific make-up or focus, the goals of most community dialogue programs include a desire to yield results — and at the personal level, all participants want their involvement to make a difference.

"I think that whenever people with diverse perspectives come together and share their concerns and ideas, you come up with better solutions to any problem."

Kindergarten teacher, Oklahoma

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Who Does What in a Community Dialogue Program?

There are five major roles in the community dialogue program process. Here's a quick look at the basic characteristics of each.

Dialogue Program Organizer

Organizers are people or groups that take primary responsibility for planning and coordinating a community dialogue program on education. Their responsibilities include recruiting dialogue facilitators, recorders, and participants. Organizers can be sole sponsors of a program but more typically work collaboratively with others. For example, a school district, the Chamber of Commerce, and the League of Women Voters might jointly sponsor a community dialogue program on education.

Group Facilitator

Facilitators are specially trained to lead a small group dialogue. They typically have skills in interpersonal communication (such as conflict resolution). In a community dialogue on education, the group facilitator takes a neutral role and doesn't express a point of view or provide expert information. It is the facilitator's job to introduce the topics to be discussed, keep the discussion on track and focused, and ensure that group-established ground rules are followed.

Sample ground rules

- Listen respectfully to others. Seek first to understand, then to be understood.
- Let everyone have a chance to be heard.
- Allow disagreements without personalizing them.
- Be honest about your thoughts and feelings.
- Speak for yourself, not for others.
- Keep confidential anything the group has not agreed to share with others outside the group.

Group Recorder

The recorder's job is to take notes during the small group dialogue. These notes can be used to help the group summarize and report on the main issues. The notes from each small group can be compared and combined to identify major ideas that are common across the entire community dialogue program.

Community Participants

Community participants are ordinary people from all walks of life: parents and non-parents, educators and school board members, business people and retirees, even high school students and other youth. They make a commitment to share their views with other members of the community, many of whom they haven't had a chance to meet. Diversity among participants is very important to the success of the community dialogue process, so most programs are widely advertised to ensure broad-based, community-wide representation.

State Policymaker Participants

State policymaker participants are elected, appointed, or administrative decision makers who have an interest in educational issues and a role in setting state policy about education. These participants may include legislators, state board of education members, other office holders, and state agency staff.

"It seems to me that the decisions our legislators make can only be as good as the information they have available to them."

Businessman, Oklahoma

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Connecting with State Policymakers

Why Should State Policymakers Be Included in Community Dialogues?

Although state policymakers may do their work far from the communities they represent, they play a very important role in how well schools and districts educate the children of those communities. Including them in a community dialogue on education creates a win-win situation for all. Students, parents, educators, and other community members have the opportunity to express their experiences, concerns, and ideas. The policymakers gain access to points-of-view they might not ordinarily encounter. Most importantly, their participation is the first step toward building new relationships with local constituents—connections that can support student and school success for years to come. While community members and state policymakers may have different philosophical and practical reasons for participating in a community dialogue on education, the benefits of their interaction are complementary.

Benefits of Participating

Community members benefit by	State policymakers benefit by
Exercising the rights and responsibilities of citizenship.	Understanding constituents and their needs better.
Letting state policymakers know what matters most to the families and communities they represent.	Demonstrating a commitment to the communities they serve.
Having a direct influence on state policymaker decisions that will affect local schools.	Activating a new and broader constituency for public education.
Gaining early buy-in from policymakers on solving complicated problems in local schools and the district.	Building personal credibility and trust in the eyes of the public.
Developing a closer connection with state policymakers which can lead to future work together on local education issues.	Strengthening their personal network for gaining public input about state education problems.

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A Step-by-Step Approach to Making the Connection

1 What You Should Know Before You Begin

Interviews with state policymakers who have participated in community dialogue programs provide insights into their work lives and how they want to connect with members of the public. The more you understand about your state policymaker as an individual and how, when, and why he or she interacts with constituents, the more likely you are to successfully communicate the opportunity *your* program represents for him or her personally.

"I don't like to think of myself as a politician, but as a facilitator of what the folks back home desire. The public wants quality education. But what is quality education? That's what we're trying to get a handle on."

Arkansas State Representative

What Matters Most to Your Policymaker?

- Every state policymaker has a unique mix of interests, expertise, and experience related to an issue. How well will the issue your community dialogue program will explore resonate with this state policymaker?
- State policymakers value citizen turnout. How can you make the number and diversity of your participants meaningful to this state policymaker?
- Policymakers value politically safe public environments. How can you ensure your group facilitators have the training and experience to create such an environment?

Is the Timing Right?

Community dialogue is a time-intensive activity that can pose a significant scheduling challenge. Many state policymakers are citizen legislators who must also earn a living. Give yourself an edge in the competition for your state policymaker's time by:

- Checking his or her calendar before you schedule program events, to avoid major conflicts such as elections or legislative sessions.
- Giving the state policymaker as much advance notice as possible.

2 Put Your Best Foot Forward in Your Invitation

Like many busy people today, state policymakers have more opportunities to participate in activities outside of work and family than they can possibly accept. As a result, most state policymakers give serious consideration to the following factors as they ponder their options for interacting with constituents about education:

- Professional interest in the opportunity
- Credibility of the host
- Potential for personal satisfaction

Professional Interest

State policymakers are much more likely to participate in events that are professionally meaningful to them. As you draft your invitation, highlight the professional relevance of the dialogue topic to policymakers who

- Are current or former educators;
- Have careers in a field that intersects with the interests of children, such as social work or the juvenile justice system; or
- Work for an agency that acts on behalf of students in the public schools (e.g., the state department of education, a commission or department of children and youth).

Even some policymakers who work in the private sector, such as small business persons who hire young people, have a professional interest in public education as it relates to the preparation of future employees.

Credibility of the Host

Not surprisingly, state policymakers are reluctant to become involved with individuals or organizations with which they are not familiar. If your organization is new or not well known, consider the following suggestions.

Providing an Introductory Packet with Your Invitation

Keeping in mind that the point is to establish credibility, your introductory packet can contain everything from copies of brochures, reports, or position papers, to reprints of articles that have been written by or about your organization. At a minimum, you'll want to include the following information printed on your letterhead:

- A brief history of why your group or organization was established and what it does.
- Brief biographical information about key people in your organization—especially those whom the state policymaker is likely to know.
- A fact sheet describing the goals of your organization related to organizing and implementing the community dialogue program on education.

Asking for Help from Someone Who Already Has Credibility with the State Policymaker

It's a small world. You may be pleasantly surprised at how easy it is to find someone who knows both you and your state policymaker. This mutual acquaintance might be delighted to introduce you to the policymaker or otherwise help you invite him or her to your dialogue program.

Personal Satisfaction

State policymakers value experiences that allow them to succeed on different levels. Participation in a community dialogue program on education offers an opportunity to satisfy such far-ranging needs as

- The enjoyment of one-on-one contact with constituents,
- The desire to gain new information and learn from others' points of view,
- Specific goals for influencing change in education, or even
- The need for exposure to potential new citizen supporters.

The chart below shows how three specific roles in a dialogue program might appeal to certain individual policymakers. It is a good idea to consider which role might best suit the needs of both your program and a particular policymaker, and then clearly outline the opportunity and your expectations in the invitation.

Potential Policymaker Roles: Who's Best Suited for What?

State policymakers in this role	Are responsible for	Best for
Participant in dialogue	• Attending as many sessions as possible. • Sharing their insights and concerns with the group. • Listening to the insights and concerns of others.	• Hands-on state policymakers who value interacting with constituents and are willing and able to make time to do so.
Member of the program organizing team	• Working with you and other community members to implement the program successfully.	• State policymakers who want to take on a formal role in helping organize, coordinate, and publicize the program.
Supporter after the program is over	• Taking action on the ideas generated by the program.	• State policymakers who are especially committed to your issue and would like to see productive action as a result of the community dialogue program. • Policymakers who are interested in your issue but unable to participate directly in the program.

3 Deal with Your State Policymaker's Concerns

While community dialogue has been around for hundreds of years, not all state policymakers will be familiar with this form of public discourse. What's more, no matter how long your organization has been in existence, some state policymakers may be unfamiliar with what it does and stands for. Expect questions and concerns. The more prepared you are to deal with them concisely and completely, the more likely it is that you'll be able to count on your state policymaker's participation or support.

If the state policymaker is concerned about this	Consider this
Who you are and what your group stands for.	Call on the support of someone the state policymaker trusts who values your organization. While a phone call or letter may be sufficient, a joint meeting might bring maximum credibility.
Whether or not the community dialogue program and process will be worth his or her time.	Remind the state policymaker of the: • Value of gaining access to the thoughts of a diverse group of constituents without the trouble or expense of hosting such a forum. • Value to the public of his or her participation. • Details about your recruitment of community participants, expected constituent turnout, and what will be done with the program results.
Whether or not he or she will be safe and comfortable interacting with the public in this way and in this setting.	Provide the state policymaker with: • Information about other state policymakers' first-hand experiences. • Details about how community dialogue differs from other interactions with constituents. • Background information on how facilitators were selected and trained.

Check It Out

See Additional Resources beginning on page 12 of this guide for more information about why, when, and how to create

- **Invitation letters**
- **Organization profiles**
- **Press releases**

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4 Make the Most of Your Policymaker's Participation

There are several junctures in the process of implementing a community dialogue program that afford you an opportunity to make an even greater connection with your state policymaker.

Before the Program Begins

- In addition to your own efforts to publicize the program, consider making it as easy as possible for your state policymaker to announce his or her participation by preparing a press release.
- Provide periodic updates to the policymaker on the progress of program coordination and the dates of key events.
- Consider inviting the state policymaker to participate in a press conference or other media event as a part of your program "kick off" campaign.

"Far and away the best way to learn what constituents think is to talk with them. Community dialogue is focused and directed. It lets you home in on what the problems and solutions are."

Oklahoma State Senator

During the Program

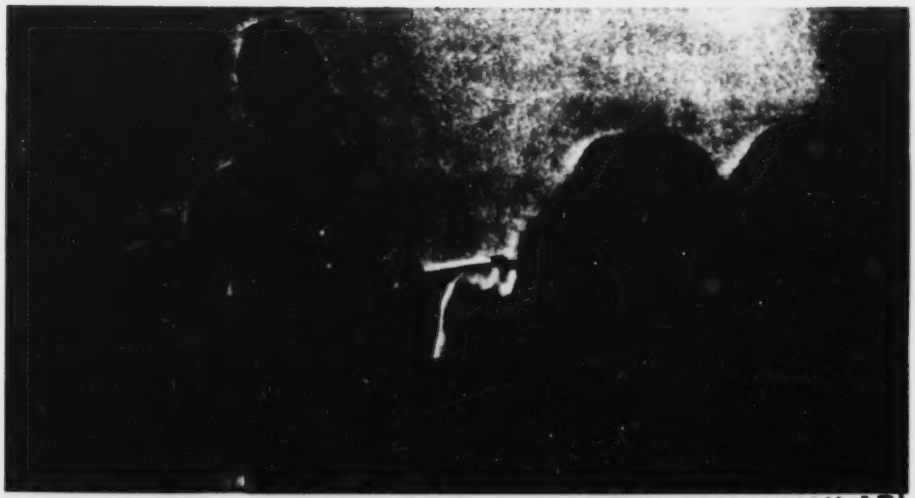
- Ask the state policymaker to consider drafting a letter to the editor, or an opinion piece for local newspapers about his or her experience, midway through the dialogue program. This media communication can broaden public awareness of the program and generate interest in the results.
- Ensure that dialogue groups take notes of the main ideas they discuss, to capture the thinking of participants in each group. This is important to policymakers, as well as most other participants.

"What's interesting about this approach to problems is that people might sit down next to their neighbor, or next to someone from across town. Relationships are built across the barriers that separate us."

Deputy Director,
Study Circles Resource Center

After the Program

- Summarize dialogue groups' notes and send to the policymaker as a record of the views of community members who participate.
- Invite the state policymaker to attend any events that are planned to celebrate the end of the program or to identify potential actions to be taken in the community as a result of the program.
- Keep in touch. Let the state policymaker know the status of new education initiatives that emerge in the community. Also let your policymaker know when you begin to organize a new community dialogue program.



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Recruiting Planner

Every recruiting strategy is unique. Pick and choose from the following action items to design a strategy for recruiting policymaker participants that's right for your program and organization.

Action Items

- ❑ Research your state policymaker's background, connection to education, and policy calendar.
- ❑ Create an introductory packet, including
  - An organization profile (see description on page 15),
  - Promotional or educational materials detailing what your organization does,
  - Copies of any feature stories written about your organization,
  - Letters of introduction to your organization from people whose opinion your policymaker values, and
  - A copy of *Making the Most of the Connection: A Policymaker's Guide to Participating in a Community Dialogue on Education* (a companion document to this guide book).
- ❑ Invite the policymaker to participate, early in the program's development.
- ❑ Solicit questions about the program from the policymaker and provide answers.
- ❑ Schedule small group dialogue sessions, kick-off and follow-up events.
- ❑ Invite the policymaker to your program kick-off event. Determine a possible role for him or her.
- ❑ Confirm his or her participation in small group dialogue sessions.
- ❑ Invite the policymaker to follow-up events. Determine a possible role for him or her.
- ❑ Follow up with your policymaker. Provide a program summary and keep in touch about future events.

Sample Invitation Letter

Dear [insert policymaker's name],

This letter is to announce an exciting project in [your city], coordinated by [your organization] as well as [key partners with whom the policymaker may be acquainted]. The program is called [name of program], and it will involve ordinary citizens from all parts of [your city or state] in open, non-partisan discussions about the education of our children. We invite you to join your constituents and other policymakers in this series of local conversations.

Unlike town meetings or large forums, community dialogues provide citizens an opportunity for their voices to be heard in a meaningful way. [Insert details of your event, including:

- The specific issues to be discussed
- When and where the meetings will be taking place
- Who will be participating]

We encourage your personal involvement in [name of program]. If you are interested in more information about this rare opportunity to hear from and communicate with the public you serve, please feel free to contact me.

Sincerely,

[Your name and title]

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Press Release Guidelines

Press releases keep the media informed about what's going on with your community dialogue program. It is not necessary to write like a journalist to create a good press release. In fact, most editors will rewrite your release before using it. It is, however, a good idea to keep in mind that your press release will be competing with many others for limited media space. The following formatting, content and style guidelines can help you get the edge.

Formatting Guidelines

- ❑ Your press release must be neatly typed, double-spaced on 8 1/2 inch plain white bond paper.
- ❑ Your margins (top, bottom, left and right) should be at least two inches wide.
- ❑ Each line should end with a complete word; avoid hyphenation.
- ❑ Following the last of line of your press release type #### (which means "the end" in journalese).
- ❑ Your release should not exceed one page unless absolutely necessary. Consider enclosing your organization profile (see page 15) to supply additional background information. As a general rule, the chances of your press release being read by an editor (and therefore used) decrease in direct proportion to its length.
- ❑ If your press release absolutely must be longer than one page, you must end the first page with a complete paragraph. Type the word "MORE" several times across the bottom of the page.

Content Guidelines

Your press release must include:

- ❑ Your organization's name, address and telephone number (include on every page).
- ❑ The name and telephone number (day and evening) of a designated contact person (include on every page).
- ❑ An indication of when the release should appear. FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE means that the information can appear at any time. If your press release is time-sensitive, use FOR RELEASE AFTER [insert the date] instead.
- ❑ Check and double-check your release to be sure you have clearly communicated who, when, where, why, how and what. Your most important point should appear first, your second-most important point second and so on.

Style Guidelines

- ❑ Use short easy to understand words. Limit sentences to 20 words if possible, and paragraphs to four or five lines.
- ❑ Avoid jargon, technical words and phrases, and the passive voice.
- ❑ Remember your objective is to have an editor read the press release. Keep it short, simple and to the point.

Organization Profile

An easy-to-read organization profile can be used to provide a credible introduction of your group to a state policymaker as well as to the press. For maximum readability, limit your organization profile to one sheet of text on your group's letterhead. In addition to basic contact information, your organization profile should include the following kinds of information.

- ❑ What your organization does.
- ❑ When and why your organization was formed.
- ❑ The names of prominent members, board members and supporters (especially those with whom your state policymaker will likely be familiar).
- ❑ How your organization is funded.
- ❑ Major organizational achievements (by year, if your organization has a history of success).

"You see ties get stronger from session to session. You start seeing people believe that they have a voice again."

Local community dialogue organizer, Arkansas

For Further Information

Materials, training, and technical assistance on how to organize and facilitate community dialogue are available from the following organizations and programs.

Community-wide Study Circle Programs

A process refined by the Study Circles Resource Center, a non-profit organization committed to helping communities bring people together into democratic, face-to-face dialogue and action on critical public issues. SCRC provides program organization advice, materials, training, and technical assistance.

Study Circles Resource Center
P. O. Box 203, Route 169
Pomfret, CT 06258
Phone: (860) 928-2616
email: scrc@studycircles.org
http://www.studycircles.org/

National Issues Forums

A dialogue process developed and supported by the National Issues Forums Institute, a nationwide network of education and community organizations dedicated to public deliberation about social issues of nation-wide concern. NIFI offers guidance in facilitating the NIF process, materials, and training.

National Issues Forums Institute
Phone: 1-800-433-7834
http://www.nifi.org

Program for Community Problem Solving

A program of the National Civic League, a 106-year-old nonpartisan, nonprofit organization dedicated to strengthening citizen democracy. The League offers information, training, and technical assistance.

National Civic League (Attn: PCPS)
1319 F Street NW, #204
Washington, DC 20004
Phone: (202) 783-2961
http://www.ncl.org/NCL/pcps.htm

Public School Forums

A collaboration among Phi Delta Kappa International, the Center on Education Policy, and the National PTA to encourage and support community forums for improving education. PDK provides materials and technical assistance.

PDK International Center for Professional Development & Services
P.O. Box 789
Bloomington, IN 47402-0789
Phone: 1-800-766-1156
email: cpds@pdkintl.org
http://www.pdkintl.org/adv/forums.htm

Deliberative Community Dialogue

Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (SEDL) has an array of materials that provide information on how community dialogue can help schools, communities, and policymakers connect with each other on issues critical to the success of public education:

- *Insights on Education Policy, Practice, and Research* (series of policy briefs)
- *Calling the Roll: Study Circles for Better Schools* (videotape)
- *Public Deliberation: A Tool for Connecting School Reform and Diversity* (paper)
- *Arkansas and Oklahoma Education Resource Guides* (models for providing education data and information to participants in community dialogue programs).

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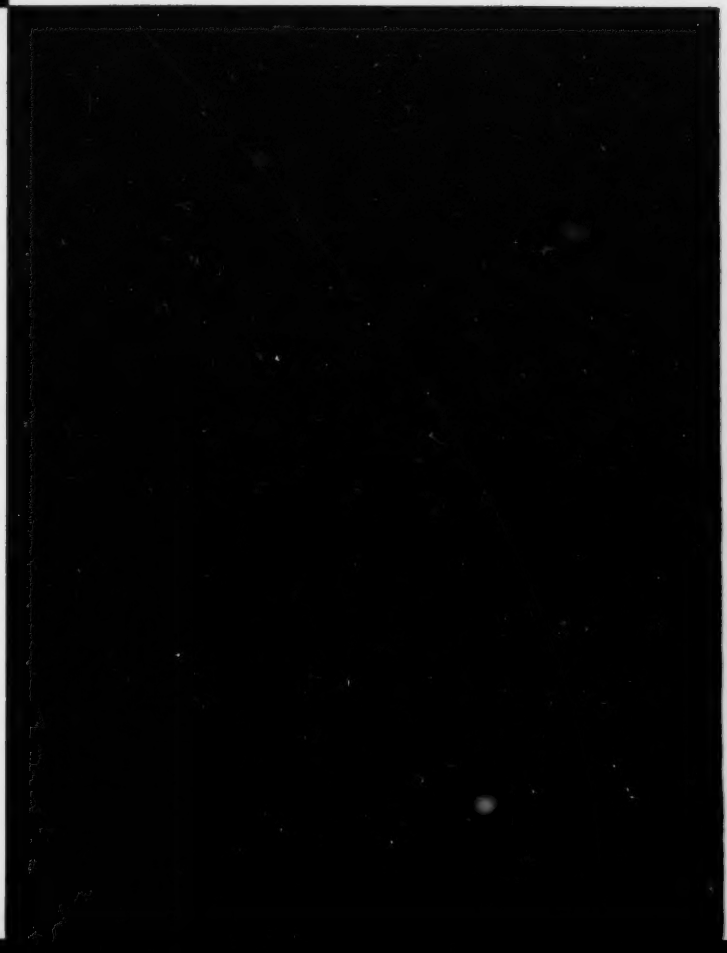

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